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## The voices in the making and unmaking of history: Arnold Bennett, Marie Corelli, and single women in late Victorian England

### Abstract

Historians are continually constructing and reconstructing, making and remaking history. Present-day preoccupations offer the historian new questions to ask and new directions to take and such an opening up of relatively unexplored areas of study has also led to the search for, and finding of, new sources to analyse. This is especially so in the branches of social history referred to as 'the history of mentalities' and 'cultural history'.

### Keywords

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## The Voices in the Making and Unmaking of History: Arnold Bennett, Marie Corelli, and Single Women in late Victorian England

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Historians are continually constructing and reconstructing, making and remaking history. Present-day preoccupations offer the historian new questions to ask and new directions to take and such an opening up of relatively unexplored areas of study has also led to the search for, and finding of, new sources to analyse. This is especially so in the branches of social history referred to as 'the history of mentalities' and 'cultural history'.

A history of mentalities concerns itself with 'ordinary' people and both their individual and collective, everyday lives and thoughts. However, the difficulty here lies with accessing, what Oliver MacDonagh terms, the 'felt reality' of the past. (1) As Bernard Bailyn understands it:

The past is not only distant, it is in various ways a different world. The basic experiences are different from ours, yet they seemed to the people who experienced them to be so normal that they did not record things that we would consider to be strange and particularly interesting.(2)

Very few, if any, of the more usual range of primary documents used by historians give comprehensive insight into this 'felt reality'. Historians studying personal, interior experiences need to find new, appropriate sources. Fiction, which offers a more personal, a more emotional dimension, is one such available source. This paper, necessarily finely focused, demonstrates this by taking Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli as evidence.(3)

Bennett and Corelli each provide valuable insights into the mindsets of late Victorian and Edwardian England. Both were acute social observers and both recorded high sales figures - indicating wide readership. Certainly at the height of her career, Marie Corelli (pseudonym for Mary Mackay) boasted extraordinarily wide readership. According to one of her biographers, Brian Masters, she reigned as the best-selling writer in the world for almost thirty years, (4) during which time at least thirty of her novels were 'world best-sellers' and approximately 100,000 copies of her books were sold every year. (5) Corelli also managed to attain, even in present-day terms, almost superstar status. For instance, Margaret McDowell comments that she attracted thousands to her lectures - where some even 'fought to touch her gown.' (6)

Born in London in 1855, Corelli studied music before turning to writing in 1885 (her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, being published in 1886). Corelli's staggering popularity had begun to wane in the years leading up to the First World War, although she still continued to publish fiction, and a growing volume of non-fiction, up until her death in 1924. It is not a simple task to account for such phenomenal, best-selling success, although John Lucas attempts to do so when he claims that:

perhaps the nearest we can come to it is by noting the fact that her stories all have an element of

sensationalism in them, plus a dose of vague mystical, other-or-ideal worldly religion...(7)

Indeed, Corelli herself alleged that her novels provide what she claimed was, 'a relief from the horrible "realities" of life that sicken and weary one's soul.' (8) Certainly her relief was much sought after. Corelli's works, as with those of other best-selling authors, are important as reflections of many of the widely-held sentiments of turn-of-the-century England - as the Oxford Popular Fiction Series argues, they:

have often articulated the collective aspirations and anxieties of their time more directly than so called serious literature.

Bennett's work, on the other hand, operates less on a collective (or generalized) and more on an individual level.(9) Born Enoch Arnold Bennett in Hanley, Staffordshire in 1867, Bennett did not become a full-time writer until 1900 (although his first novel, *A Man from the North*, was published in 1898). He studied law and between 1885 and 1893 he worked in his father's law firm and then in a solicitor's office in London. Before producing a voluminous amount of novels, plays and non-fictional works, Bennett worked as a free-lance journalist for *The Staffordshire Sentinel* and then assumed an editorial role on the weekly journal, *Woman*. Although Bennett produced literary works up until his death in 1931, it is generally accepted that his best pieces, as with those of Corelli, come before the First World War.(10) But, in contrast with Corelli, Bennett's works achieved popularity, not because of sensationalism or an interest in spiritualism, but for their portrayal of a reality his readers knew well. In his novels, Bennett peers behind the 'mundane façades' of the 'ordinary' man or woman to reveal the 'hidden' face of at least some sections of society - including that of his primarily middle-class readership. He explores individual consciousnesses and reveals the extraordinary depths of those who are otherwise assumed to be 'ordinary' people. Indeed, this is why John Carey appoints Bennett the hero of his book, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* - because when we look to Bennett's novels:

We know by the end that their characters are not remotely ordinary, but unforgettably singular. Yet they are also commonplace.(11)

However, such penetrating explorations are not Bennett's only qualifications as a voice commenting on the interior minds of late Victorian women. Margaret Drabble argues that his editorial position on the weekly magazine, *Woman* (12), offered him an awareness and understanding of the domestic preoccupations of many female readers (13) and the motivations of the women working with him on the journal.(14) Also, the degree to which he succeeded in the increasingly commercially-focused literary world of turn-of-the-century England is partial testimony to the fact that he was in touch with the literary expectations of his audience. Although primarily regarded as a respected middle-brow author, he also managed to achieve the status of a minor best-seller.(15) Bennett, like most successful authors, succeeded because between himself and his readers there was a shared bond of recognition and understanding.

I now turn to the idea of the New Woman. The New Woman of the 1890s is a complex concept. Not only was she largely a literary creation - featuring extensively in the fiction of the time (16) - but

also, because her emergence was accompanied by incessant' controversy and discussion in newspapers and journals, she was very much a creation of the Press. Despite such literary origins, and subsequent doubts about the reality of her existence, the New Woman of the 1890s was recognizably visible in turn-of-the-century English society. Indeed, as Barbara Caine contends, the fact that the term was coined was the:

result of a growing sense that there were changes in the behaviour, the activities, even the nature of women which needed to be articulated. (17)

But rather than the New Woman being reduced to one clear and cohesive set of characteristics, she was a pot-pourri of ideas - all with at least one thing in common - the desire for varying degrees of greater female freedom.(18)

The understanding of the New Woman most suited to this present discussion is not that of the popular press stereotype, but rather that of the middle-brow novelist, Arnold Bennett. Newspapers and journals could produce one-dimensional stereotypes and caricatures of the New Woman. Bennett, on the other hand, as a middle-brow author dealing in the reconstruction of his immediate world, had the task of portraying her humanity or her interiority. By presenting aspects of the New Woman in his female characters, by infusing the stereotype with life, he created a new woman or new women that most of his readers would have recognized in their everyday lives. This is why his thoughts, and consequently those of his readers, are invaluable as contemporary insights into the 'reality' of the New Woman's existence.

Hilda Lessways, a main character of Bennett's *Clayhanger* (1910) and the heroine (if such a term is appropriate) of its sequel, *Hilda Lessways* (1911), provides such valuable insight. She is valuable because she contains many of the diverse characteristics of the New Woman. The New Woman, in many ways, represents the tensions between the old and the new and Bennett, through Hilda, plays out this battle. He explores the turmoil of her interior world mapping, not only the tensions that exist between her hopes and ambitions and the expectations and limitations of the outside world (that of the English Midlands at the turn-of-the-century), but also those that take place within her own mind. He traces the conflict between her fierce yearnings for independence and freedom and her tamer desires to conform to the more traditional ideas of her society. No matter how much Hilda wishes to be different from 'other girls', from her mother, from nineteenth-century expectations, the very fact that she is a product of all of the above means that she can never fully escape from them. Indeed, as Bennett implies, she doesn't really want to.

Hilda, in her desperate attempt to flee a life conventionally open to women - one of domesticity, a suffocating existence that she detests - looks to the male domain. She believes that the degree of freedom and independence that she desires, or needs, is only attainable there. By desiring to - and attempting to - enter such a domain, Hilda brings upon herself feelings of frustration and displacement, feelings typical of new women.

Her most external New Woman trait is her job as a clerk (and later sub-editor) of a local newspaper. She does not work due to financial necessity. Her sole motivation is her desire to taste new experiences - experiences not usually open to women - experiences ultimately regarded as male. And for a short while she succeeds. After finding employment and briefly living away from her mother, Bennett claims that:

She was alone, free; and she tasted her freedom to the point of ecstasy.(19)

By marrying George Cannon, previously her employer, however, she herself terminates her dreams - her vague dreams (in Bennett's words) of 'an enlarged liberty, of wide interests, and of original activities - such as no woman to her knowledge had ever had' (20):

She had had glimpses, once, of the male world... But the glimpses had been in vain and tantalizing. She had been in the male world, but not of it, as though encircled in a glass ball which neither she nor the males could shatter.(21)

On the one hand, Bennett explores the relationship between Hilda's dreams and the unsympathetic reality of the outside world. On the other, he portrays the tensions between her more advanced ideas and the more traditional ones she has grown up with. Her reactions against the traditional role of women, for example, do not automatically render her attitudes towards men typically modern. Although her words and actions, sparked by her intelligence, betray her own feelings of complacency and superiority - over both men and women - her deep-seated desire is that she find a man she can stand in awe of - feel subservient to. Her sense of intellect fights against such desires, desires reminiscent of a Victorian stereotype. Although her feelings of her own inner strength frequently lead her to act maternally towards the men in her life - men, who at times appear fragile and vulnerable(22) - such emotions are then rivalled by her contrasting need to be made to feel humble and submissive in their masculine presences: (23)

She dreamed, in her extreme excitement, of belonging absolutely to some man. And despite all her pride and independence, she dwelt with pleasure and longing on the vision of being his, of being at his disposal, of being under his might, of being helpless before him. (24)

Despite the juxtaposition of old and new that Hilda experiences, she still desires, and works toward, being unconventional. And in many ways she is. Unlike the Victorian ideal of womanhood, Hilda craves sexual pleasure. Bennett informs us that she desires her own and George Cannon's sexual union with a 'bliss' that can only be described as 'torment'.(25) She is also unconventional when, on finding out that she is not legally married to the bigamist, Cannon, she thinks of it in terms of emancipation:

She felt none of the shame conventionally proper to a girl deceived. On the contrary, deep within herself, she knew that the catastrophe was a deliverance.(26)

She also adopts what she believes is a more masculine view of religion - her belief is that '...to dream of consolation from religion was sentimentally womanish; even in her indifference she preferred straightforward, honest damnation to the soft self-deceptions of feminine curiosity.'(27) But this is not to say that she has the ability to escape from the more traditional views that are also intrinsically part of her character. Despite her strength and independence, she experiences feelings of guilt and shame concerning her desire for sexual pleasure.(28) Although viewing religious consolation with contempt, she does attempt regular church-attending after her mother's death. And, despite feeling relief concerning her first marriage break-up, she does desire a new married existence with the other

man in her life, Edwin Clayhanger.

Clearly, Hilda is not a stereotypical nineteenth-century woman, nor indeed is she a stereotypical New Woman. Instead, she is a realistic mixture of the two. She is one of the many women regarded as 'new' in turn-of-the-century England.

In contrast with Bennett, Corelli deals in stereotypes. In her case it is ineffective to examine the thoughts and actions of any one of her characters in order to access the opinions expressed concerning the New Woman; her novels require a different approach. As Masters states:

Marie Corelli has no time for characterisation, with the result that all her heroines resemble each other, as do all her villains.<sup>(29)</sup>

This lack of development of her characters does not matter. In *The Mighty Atom* (1896), Corelli employs them only to furnish the plot, as actors in her moral debate. She uses them principally to show how men and women ought to live.

In many ways, although not all, Corelli's opinions concerning women and morality are typical of middle-class Victorian ideals. In direct contrast to Hilda's thoughts on religion, Corelli claims that:

Women especially, who, but for Christianity, would still be in the low place of bondage and humiliation formerly assigned to them in the barbaric periods, are most of all to be reproached for their wicked and wanton attacks upon their great Emancipator, who pitied and pardoned their weaknesses as they had never been pitied or pardoned before.<sup>(30)</sup>

Reacting against the growing number of female sceptics, Corelli condemns material advancement for women (education, career opportunities, improved health...) if it interferes with morality, which, she implies, it inevitably does.

Corelli makes oblique reference to the 'New Woman' debate. For example, the woman she refers to as:

one such Christ-scorning female, with short hair and spectacles, who had taken high honours at Girton, and who was eminently fitted to become the mother of a brood of atheists, who, like human cormorants, would be prepared to swallow benefits, and deny the Benefactor. <sup>(31)</sup>

Yet, her condemnation and treatment of 'new' women differs according to their social class. Rebellious women of the upper ranks of society, who have the freedom and means by which to



threaten the social order and the traditionally appointed roles for women, warrant a tone of bitterness. Whereas, less dangerous, 'silly' women of the lower classes who cannot change the existing social order, nor even benefit themselves by trying to do so, are treated with mocking ridicule.

In *The Mighty Atom*, Corelli creates two parallel but opposing worlds - one of modern realism, the other of innocent idealism. In her world of realism, she patronizingly contrasts the simple, uneducated housemaid Lucy with her socially superior mistress, Mrs. Valliscourt. This demonstrates her point that women, free from the corrupting influence of modern thought, are pure women - as women should be. When Mrs. Valliscourt abandons her husband and son, in favour of Sir Charles, Lucy - acting as a woman should - cries with sorrow and pity for the young abandoned son, Lionel. Corelli comments, with leaden irony, that Lucy had:

'barbaric' notions of motherhood, - she believed in its sacredness in quite an obstinate, prejudiced and old-fashioned way. She was nothing but a 'child of nature', poor, simple Ibsen-less housemaid Lucy! - throughout all creation, nature makes mother-love a law, and mother's duty paramount.(32)

Despite her strong words, Corelli's own ideas are not completely 'barbaric'. She does allow Mrs. Valliscourt some sympathy - she is, after all, married to a cruel and Godless tyrant. But, having done so, Corelli is careful to emphasize that Mrs. Valliscourt is not a typical woman. Indeed, she is one who admits that her husband has "killed every womanly sentiment" in her - who, by separating her from her child, has robbed her of "God, of hope, of every sense of duty. (33)

Corelli's countervailing world - an overly sentimental one - revolves around the two children of the novel. Both children and their innocent surroundings are metaphors - symbolic of a pure and uncomplicated world - of a haven Corelli's audience aspires to. In this analogy to the world of adults, Corelli finds the means with which to, not only implicitly attack modern society, and so often, modern women, but also to paint a perfect picture of how the world should be - one of innocence, pure love and chivalry.(34)

Corelli's novels, despite being 'escapist' in tone, do not ignore the very real issues of the world she and her readers inhabit. She does treat these issues seriously even though she would rather they did not taint the ideal world that she has created. Indeed, Corelli uses references to such intrusive issues to bolster the attractiveness of her own ideal world. In saying this, although she does expose her audience to such 'realism', a great deal of her attraction lies with her insistence on allowing them to then recede back into a world of innocence. For example, she allows her audience a taste of adultery and, in the case of *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), desperate lust, but with her constant moralizing she then absolves them of any possible guilt for doing so. Her escapism was so phenomenally popular because she was so in touch with the collective fears and aspirations of so many readers. Instead of new women and ungentlemanly men, Corelli would have 'women simple, noble, maternal' and the 'men strong, brave, God-fearing and manly' .(35) So too, it seems, would her vast army of readers.

In conclusion, Bennett and Corelli offer competing opinions of the New Woman of the 1890s. One appeals to a sense of realism, the other to idealism. Although partially running counter to each other, both concepts can nevertheless still be fused together to help create a more comprehensive image. Both reveal, for example, that tensions existed within nineteenth-century English society concerning the idea of the New Woman. Therefore, in attempting to construct as full a picture as possible of attitudes towards single women, or new women, in late Victorian and Edwardian England, both Bennett and Corelli contribute in clearly different, though equally valuable and useful, ways. When



used together, in complementary fashion, the possibilities of presenting well fleshed-out and varied images of past mentalities, of 'interior lives', are extremely encouraging. Fiction, whatever its status, can help historians with their task of constructing and reconstructing 'ordinary', yet singular, 'personal maps of reality'.

## Notes

(1) MacDonagh, Oliver, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds*, New Haven, 1991, p.ix. And this is similar to the task of accessing what Bernard Bailyn terms the 'hubbub' and Lionel Trilling refers to as the 'hum' or 'buzz of implication' - the unstated, but implied, common or shared assumptions of a particular time and place.

(2) Bailyn, Bernard, *On the Teaching and Writing of History*. Responses to a series of questions, Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1994, p.52

(3) This is a shortened version of a longer paper which was prepared for presentation at the Australian Historical Association conference, Sydney, 1998.

(4) Masters, Brian, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter, The Extraordinary Lift Of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, p.3. Other readings on Corelli include: W. S. Scott, *Corelli: The Story of a Friendship* (1955); Eileen Bigland, *Corelli: The Woman and the Legend* (1953); George Bullock, *Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller* (1940). Shorter readings include: 'Corelli' entry in Kemp, Mitchell, Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction: an Oxford companion* (1997), p. 77; John Lucas on 'Marie Corelli' in *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers* (1979), pp.281-283 ; Margaret McDowell on 'Marie Corelli' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol.34 (1978), pp. 82-89.

(5) Ibid., 6. Also Margaret McDowell, writing for *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, supports such figures. She notes that one prime example of Corelli's literary success is her novel, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), which sold more copies than any other English novel before, and which, by the time of her death in 1924, was in its sixtieth edition. In order to emphasize Corelli's popularity, McDowell also refers to the sales figures of her closest competitors at the peak of their careers: Hall Caine who sold 45,000 copies per year; Mrs. Humphry Ward with about 35,000 copies; and H.G.Wells who averaged 15,000 copies annually. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol.34, Gale Research Company, Detroit, 1978, p.84

(6) McDowell, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, p.84-85 - 'thousands waited outside the halls where Marie Corelli lectured, and some fought to touch her gown. Even in the 1920s tourists gathered each afternoon to glimpse her as she emerged from her house at Stratford-upon-Avon' [to where, I should explain, she had moved, in order that her name would be tied to that other literary great - Shakespeare!]. McDowell also expresses wonder at her popularity (from a twentieth century point of view) when: 'Her books were outrageously overwritten - every page loaded with adjectives, adverbs, assorted clichés, archaisms, and repetitions. Her novels were far longer than those of her contemporaries, and her readers seemed not to skip the long, unbroken pages of description; in fact, many admirers memorized the passages they found uplifting, poetic, and filled with "lovely pictures." Her scolding rhetoric rose almost to hysteria on such subjects as women who smoked or rode bicycles, Parisians who drank and read cheap novels, socialists, suffragists, and Carnegie libraries.'

(7) Lucas, John 'Marie Corelli', in James Vinson (ed.), *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, MacMillan Press, London and Basingstoke, 1979 (pp.281-283), p.283

(8) Masters, *Now Barabbas*, p.3

(9) Bennett's novels look to the 'ordinary', or in John Carey's words: 'to the masses - or, rather, to the hidden lives which that crude metaphor deletes - for its natural succour.' Carey, John, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, Faber and Faber, London, 1992, p.160

(10) Lucas, John, 'Arnold Bennett', in James Vinson (ed.), *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, Macmillan Press, London and Basingstoke, 1979 (pp.111-115). Other readings on Bennett include: John Lucas, *Bennett: A Study of his Fiction* (1975); Margaret Drabble, *Bennett* (1974); John Wain, *Bennett* (1967); Oswald H. Davis, *The Master: A Study of Bennett* (1966); Georges Lafourcade, *Arnold Bennett: A Study* (1939). Shorter readings include: 'Bennett' entry in Kemp, Mitchell, Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction: an Oxford companion* (1997), pp. 27-28; Anita Miller on 'Arnold Bennett' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol.34 (1978), pp. 17-28.

(11) Ibid, p.163

(12) Drabble, Margaret, *Arnold Bennett, a biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974, p.55-6- first as assistant editor, in 1893, and then as chief editor, in 1896.

(13) Ibid, p.56 - which is why, for example, he could paint such a complete picture of the domesticated Constance Povey in *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908).

(14) Ibid, p.57 - Women, Drabble refers to as: 'the single women who were so marked a sociological feature of the time, and whose discontent fed the Suffragette movement: the typists, the secretaries, the failed Ann Veronicas who had broken away from middle-class homes, the overworked shorthand girls who had worked their way up out of the shirt factories.'

(15) Carey, *The Intellectuals*, p.154. In 1898, for example, he published his novel *The Grand Babylon Hotel* which sold 50,000 copies in hardback and was translated into French, German, Italian and Swedish.

(16) Rubinstein, David, *Before the Suffragettes: women's emancipation in the 1890s*, Harvester, Brighton, 1986, p.15, and Caine, Barbara, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p.252 - It is widely accepted, for example, that the term was first coined; in 1894, by the novelist Sarah Grand.

(17) Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p.252

(18) In Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p.20. As one contemporary, Hugh Stutfield, claimed, the New Woman was '...simply the woman of today striving to shake off old shackles.' Stutfield was also a contemporary who was convinced of the reality of the New Woman: '...the immense mass of "revolting" literature cannot have grown out of nothing, or continue to flourish upon mere curiosity.'

(19) Bennett, Arnold, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976 [1911], p.89

(20) Ibid., 255-6

(21) Ibid., 256

(22) eg: Ibid., 164 and 52...

(23) eg., Ibid., 29, 51, 52 and 313

(24) Ibid., 225-6

(25) Ibid., 235

(26) Ibid., 273

(27) Ibid., 117-8

(28) Ibid., 247

(29) Ibid., 13

(30) Corelli, Marie, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p.104

(31) Ibid., 104. She also refers to the New Woman debate, through the aristocratic party-goer, Sir Charles Lascelles, who ridicules the "ugly 'advanced' young women who have brought their bicycles [to a castle he is visiting] and go tearing about the country all day..." (p.17)

(32) Ibid., 150

(33) Ibid., 155

(34) Corelli provides her readers with a means of escapism. They could recognize in *Lionel the Victorian* ideal of the perfect gentleman - he whose chivalrous thoughts, in 'the pursuit of the fair', are paralleled with: 'the scaling of walls and the ascending of fortified towers' (p.75) And they could behold, in the infant 'Jessamine', a pillar of perfect womanhood. 'Jessamine' - the innocent, weak yet angelic, coquette - who completes the mating-game - who: 'like all feminine things, condescended to be caught at last, and to look shyly in the face of her youthful captor.'(p.46)

(35) Ibid., 158



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